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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 002185

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ENRG](#) [PTER](#) [IN](#) [BM](#) [BD](#)

SUBJECT: MEA DEFENDS RECORD ON BURMA AHEAD OF FM SINGH TRIP

REF: A. STATE 42847

[B](#). 03 NEW DELHI 6983

[C](#). NEW DELHI 1426

Classified By: PolCouns Geoffrey Pyatt, for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Joint Secretary (SE Asia I) Mitra Vashishta defended India's policies in Burma in a March 17 meeting with PolCouns and Poloff, suggesting that progress on democratic reforms was dependent on engagement with the Burmese body politic, and warning that the USG focus on Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) could backfire. Foreign Minister Natwar Singh leaves for a four-day visit to Burma on March 24, but MEA contacts tell us not to expect significant new developments, despite press reports speculating about the reopening of the "Stilwell Road." Vashishta did not believe Bangladesh would cooperate on a potential gas pipeline from Burma to India, suggesting that the project will remain hypothetical. End Summary.

GOI and USG Policies

[1](#)2. (C) In a wide-ranging discussion with PolCouns and Poloff about GOI and USG policies toward Burma, outgoing Joint Secretary Vashishta defended Indian engagement with and plans

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for Burma. Pressed on the apparent contradiction between India's new doctrine of active support for democracy in the region (Ref C) and its policy toward Rangoon, the Joint Secretary averred that more time was needed for GOI policies

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to bear fruit. Drawing a parallel to the current Indian pressure on Nepal, she suggested that the GOI was waiting for a time when its influence across Burmese society would increase to the point where the regime would listen to Indian demands for democracy.

[1](#)3. (C) Responding to the USG push for a resolution on Burma in the Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) (Ref A), Vashishta doubted the effectiveness of any such action. There was not enough international involvement in Burma for outside pressure to have an effect, she argued, adding that the US and European policy of isolation will not work because China's support allows Burma to get away with ignoring international pressure.

[1](#)4. (C) The Joint Secretary warned that the US and European preoccupation with imprisoned leader ASSK could be counterproductive. While ASSK's status was important, it was not the only issue. Pondering the "cost of getting her out," she cautioned that international pressure focused only on freedom for ASSK might let the junta "get away with more" in return for freeing the detained democracy activist. Vashishta repeated the GOI's view that ASSK is less relevant to democracy promotion than increased engagement with the society (Ref B).

No Blank Check

[1](#)5. (C) Vashishta acknowledged that India's current policy could be construed as giving a blank check to the junta, but replied that the GOI was following the best policy for dealing with Than Shwe. She acknowledged that the GOI needed to do a much better job of describing publicly its support for democratic forces in Burma, in order to refute perceptions of a morally vacant approach. The regime would not respond to isolation or sanctions, she argued, because that would cause it to lose face. While India was trying to engage Burma to gain influence with the junta, US policy had nothing positive to offer the regime. She added that India's previous USG-approved disdain for the regime in Rangoon had let China gain influence in Burma at India's expense.

Foreign Minister to Visit Rangoon

[1](#)6. (C) Foreign Minister Singh will visit Rangoon March 24-27, another stop on his tour of India's neighbors in his first year in office. MEA Undersecretary (South-East Asia) Pooja Kapoor told Poloff that the FM is expected to meet with Than as well as the Burmese Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, where he will raise India's concern for democracy,

political reforms, and treatment of the political opposition. Although noted strategic commentator C Raja Mohan has speculated that the GOI is discussing reopening the "Stilwell Road" linking India, China and Burma, Kapoor stated that no new announcements would come out of the meetings.

17. (C) While democracy may be on the agenda, the GOI is more concerned with insurgent groups operating across the border between Burma and Manipur state in India, MG (ret) Ashok Mehta, a noted Burma expert, told Poloff. Mehta suggested that Natwar's priorities will be encouraging Burmese military action against insurgents, and reiterating GOI proposals made during Than's October 2004 New Delhi visit for defense cooperation and equipment sales. Although India has not conducted joint military operations with Burma, Mehta asserted that two Indian Army brigades are currently operating against insurgents in Manipur on the Burmese border, a line we have also heard from other security contacts.

Gas Pipeline Unlikely

18. (C) Vashishta predicted that the proposal for a gas pipeline from Burma to India via Bangladesh would collapse because of obstacles placed by Dhaka, lamenting the "obstructionist" attitude and internal disputes between Bangladeshi leaders. There was no will among the politicians in Bangladesh to make it work, she complained, and Burma and India had no influence over them.

Comment

19. (C) The Foreign Minister's visit to Rangoon is a routine stop on his calendar, but is incongruous coming during the meeting of the UNCHR and following Foreign Secretary Saran's February 14 speech in which he stated that India would always stand with democratic elements in neighboring countries (Ref C). The GOI shows no signs of fading in its belief that further engagement across the society, rather than isolation, is the best way to induce democratic reform in Burma. Conveniently, GOI engagement with the junta also furthers India's own strategic interests in cracking down on insurgents in Manipur, exploring new options for energy supplies, and countering the rise of Chinese influence in India's periphery.
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